
Alexander Hamilton: One Of Our Founding Fathers, Villain To Some, Hero To Others

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Recently, a musical based on his life was put on Broadway and quickly became immensely popular. But an issue came up; is “Hamilton: an American Musical” an accurate representation of his life? According to Annette Gordon-Reed, a History Professor at Harvard University, “Hamilton: an American musical is “an idea of who we would like Hamilton to be”(Schuessler).

“Hamilton: an American Musical” is a musical written about founding father Alexander Hamilton the “ten-dollar founding father without a father”(Miranda). It was written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, an American actor, composer, lyricist, playwright, and singer. The play was created when Miranda saw Ron Chernow’s biography of Alexander Hamilton at the airport and purchased it. After reading the book, he decided to write a play about Hamilton’s life. The musical is very popular, being the highest-grossing show on Broadway in 2019. However, “Hamilton” was not always the sensation it is today. It started off as an Off-Broadway production and slowly grew into the popular play we know it as of today. However, some people don’t believe that Hamilton should be celebrated in the way he is in the musical.

Hamilton’s life is hard to define because it was very complicated and long with twists and turns along the way. According to Dictionary.com, Alexander Hamilton was an “American statesman and writer on government (and) the first Secretary of the Treasury”(Dictionary.com). However, Hamilton was so much more than that. He fought in the revolutionary war alongside George Washington and later married U.S Senators’ daughter, Elizabeth Schuyler. Much later in his life, he had the infamous scandal with Maria Reynolds and was eventually killed by Vice President Aaron Burr in a duel. The life of Alexander Hamilton could be compared to “Hamilton: an American Musical”. In fact, Hamilton’s life wasn’t really talked about in a large scale until Lin-Manuel Miranda decided to write the musical.

Alexander’s early life was very traumatic and difficult. When he was about 10 (his exact date of birth is unknown) his father left the house. In 1768, his mother died after being very sick. Determined, Alexander set his mind on moving on and getting a good education. He was a very hard worker and was quickly promoted at his job at a bookstore. In the musical the characters say he “got a lot farther by working a lot harder, by being a lot smarter, by being a self-starter...” (Miranda). That is to say, he started at the very bottom and worked his way up to the top with nothing but his own intelligence. After being recognized for his talent, friends, family, and even strangers gathered enough money for him to move to New York to pursue his dreams. In 1773, he enrolls in Kings College where he became a studious and successful student. Hamilton was very intrigued in the brewing rebellion between the colonies and Britain. Furthermore, in 1776, he goes on to fight in the Battle of Trenton and is even promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Hamilton’s desire for glory and to leave a legacy behind drove him to search for more fame. In

1780 he meets Elizabeth “Eliza” Schuyler, who was a daughter of a wealthy general. In the same year, he decides to marry Eliza, furthering his connection to wealth and fame. In 1787, he was invited to join the constitutional convention as a representative from New York. While there, he made quite an impression by proposing a plan for the Bank of America which is based on the Bank of England.

In the musical, Hamilton is often described as never being satisfied and you can really see that in his life. According to Britanica, he continuously requests a higher position in the war, pressing “Washington for an active command in the field” (DeConde). Hamilton never felt fulfilled and was always searching for a way to improve himself. Impatient and keen on action, Hamilton snaps and gets in a duel with Charles Lee, who bad mouthed Washington. Finally, in 1781, the Revolutionary War ended with the Battle of Yorktown. After the revolutionary war is over, Hamilton returned to New York and was a lawyer for a couple years. Soon after, George Washington asked Alexander to be the first Secretary of Treasury.

Almost 9 years later, Eliza and her sister Angelica Schuyler (later Schuyler-Church) go to their father’s house for their summer. That same summer, Hamilton has the infamous scandal with Maria Reynolds. This involved her husband James Reynolds finding out about their relationship and then blackmailing Alexander Hamilton with the information. Additionally, Aaron Burr also unseats Philip Schuyler (Alexander’s Father-in-law) for the U.S senate. This is where the controversy between him and Hamilton begins. In 1797 George Washington resigns his presidency. Therefore, a new president had to be chosen and the person the people chose was John Adams. Soon after he gains power, Adams fires Alexander and makes him extraordinary mad. In 1797, with the hopes of protecting his legacy, Hamilton writes “The Reynolds Pamphlet” a handout talking about his scandal with the Reynolds. According to the History Channel, by writing the Reynolds Pamphlet, “Hamilton torpedoed his own presidential ambitions for good”(History Editors). Essentially, when he released the tell-tale brochure, he ruined any chance he had to be president.

In the election of 1800, Hamilton is asked to choose between Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson for president. Despite what the public thought, Hamilton voted for Jefferson, with the logic that Aaron Burr doesn’t have any real beliefs. Burr, clearly was furious because he lost the election at the hands of one of his life-long friends. After a heated argument, the two men decided to have a duel. During the duel, Hamilton famously pointed his gun at the sky while Aaron Burr fired his weapon. Alexander Hamilton died on July 12, 1804. Presumably at the age of 47 from a gunshot wound. What some might not know is that he “left his wife and seven children heavily in debt”(DeConde). The fact that he left his family so heavily in debt might point towards the fact that he might not be as marvelous and the musical depicts him to be.

Generally speaking, It is difficult to translate 47 years of someone’s life into a roughly two and a half hour play. However, according to Caitlin Weber who is an American history teacher at Rolling Hills Middle School, “Overall... the plot was quite accurate...” (Weber). Nevertheless, there are some details that Lin-Manuel Miranda either exaggerated or wrote out of the play. One of those details is that according to most sources Angelica Schuyler had no romantic relationship with Alexander Hamilton. To clarify, one of the driving points of the show is that both Eliza and Angelica love Hamilton but Eliza ends up marrying him. Angelica is supposedly haunted by her decision and forever regrets this. Whereas in documents she is stated to have eloped with her husband. That is to say, she married him without their parent’s permission which strongly implies she never really loved Hamilton but instead loved another man.

Furthermore, another detail is left out of the play; The Schuyler family had a son. To clarify, Angelica's character says " My father has no sons so I'm the one who has to social climb for one"(Miranda). On the contrary, Philip Schuyler, (Angelica's father) had a son: Philip

Schuyler ?. In addition, the musical strongly implies that Alexander Hamilton is an abolitionist (a person who is actively fighting the institution of slavery). Conversely, there are no documents stating that he was one except for the fact that he did not own slaves but that doesn't necessarily make him an abolitionist.

Despite the inaccuracies, there were a lot of parts in the show that were accurate. One of those was the costumes. According to Paul Tazewell, "we (the team for "Hamilton")used period influence in the costume design...for HAMILTON"(Kucharski). The costumes were highly accurate because they were based on several things. Some of these include wealth, time period, and character. For instance, Thomas Jefferson, who was portrayed as very wealthy and frivolous wore purple velvet which represented his attitude and social status. Additionally, the costumes changed throughout the show. This is best represented in Eliza's costume. In the beginning, she wears a full length waist-cinched dress with a very full skirt. Later in the show, which is in the 1800's she wears a looser dress that is cinched on the ribcage.

Another comment that many people made was that the casting of the show was completely inaccurate. However, when Lin-Manuel Miranda casted the show, he purposely casted an all/ mostly colored cast. According to Annette Gordon-Reed, an American Historian and professor at Harvard University said, "Imagine 'Hamilton' with white actors, ...Would the rosy view of the founding era grate?"(Schuessler). That is to say, if we wrote the "colored" characters out of the show, would we still appreciate the musical for what it is?

While it is true that the overall plot of "Hamilton" is accurate, the representation of some characters, namely Alexander Hamilton is slightly inaccurate. As mentioned before Hamilton was not actually an abolitionist. According to Eric Foner, an American historian, "Hamilton's elitism and dedication to property rights...were 'more important to him' than fighting slavery"(Schuessler). That is to say, even though he did not own slaves, his other ideals were more important to him than the abolishing of slavery. Another thing that is touched upon but not fully addressed in the musical was Hamilton's temper. He was very hot-headed and jealous; very quick to jump to conclusions and make a decision, even if it might have been the wrong one.

Clearly, Alexander Hamilton was not necessarily the great man he is shown to be in "Hamilton: an American Musical". On the other hand, Caitlin Weber said that in order to make the play more interesting, sometimes you have to exaggerate some details and paint the "good guy" in a better light to make him more likable.

Although Alexander Hamilton might not seem like a great man in the context of our time, he accomplished some amazing feats. Therefore, it is important to recognize his story. The American people can benefit from the stories of our founding fathers and learn from both their successes and their failures. It is very possible that his story could live on in the form of a musical for years or even decades just as other shows like Phantom of the Opera or Chicago. Granted, Hamilton had a sordid past. However, his ideas and creations live on in our country and continually make it great.